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Moisio, Sami; Stokke, Kristian; Sæther, Elin; Larsen, Henrik Gutzon; Ek, Richard; Lund Hansen, Anders

Published in:
Political Geography

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.005)

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Moisio, S., Stokke, K., Sæther, E., Larsen, H. G., Ek, R., & Lund Hansen, A. (2011). Interventions in Nordic political geographies. *Political Geography*, 30(5), 241-249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.005>

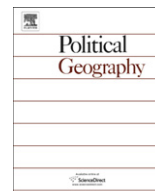
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Interventions in Nordic political geographies

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Keywords

The Nordic region
Political geography
The Nordic model
Context

Introduction

Sami Moisisio

This series of interventions is based on a panel discussion organized in Turku, Finland, as part of the Nordic Geographers' Meeting in 2009, where it was observed that the whole issue of Nordic political geographies is a problematic yet interesting one and that very little has been published on the topic – even though scholarship in political geography has mushroomed in some of the Nordic countries over the past fifteen years or so (Moisisio & Harle, 2010; O'Loughlin, Raento, & Sidaway, 2008; Stokke & Sæther, 2010). Rather than present reviews of political geography in each of the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), each intervention cuts across national boundaries to inquire how political geography – both as a practice and as an academic discipline – simultaneously characterizes and divides the countries of the Nordic region.

The lead intervention is provided by Kristian Stokke and Elin Sæther, whose essay is an important opening that forms the backbone for our collection. The rest of the interventions more or less explicitly comment on the issues that are taken up in their paper. These “responses” act as a springboard for some concluding remarks by the authors of the opening intervention.

In the ensuing pages we make a heuristic distinction between three Nordic political geographies – which are of course entangled and co-constituted. We first elaborate upon Nordic political geography as a specific context that has not only been characterized by

various region-building processes but also conflated with a specific type of statehood. Secondly, we ask whether Nordic political geography can be considered a distinct geopolitical tradition or experience, and finally, Nordic political geography is dealt with as a regional academic practice.

Stokke and Sæther focus on whether there is a distinct Nordic political geography that is rooted in the somewhat exceptional experience of Nordic countries that is often understood to be characterized by a homogenous “Nordic model” of statehood. This is an important theme given that the construction of a Nordic political geography is problematic because it assumes the existence of impermeable geographical borders of the kind that have long been criticized by political geographers, and because the developmental trajectories of what is today being called the Nordic welfare state are country-specific. This theme is taken up in the Finnish context by Sami Moisisio, who both scrutinizes the apparent unity of the Nordic region and makes some contextual remarks on the birth of “Nordic statehood” in Finland in the form of a “cartel state”.

The second theme addressed by Stokke and Sæther is the geopolitical specificity of the Nordic context. Even though the “Nordic states” differ fundamentally in their geopolitical histories, Nordic political geography can be looked on as the specific geopolitical experience or tradition of a “small-state”. Henrik Gutzon Larsen asks whether being a small state could indeed be thought of as a distinct orientation for the political geographies of the Nordic states and describes how this “small-state geopolitics” is being played out in the Danish and, to a lesser extent, Swedish contexts.

The third issue that is raised is the whole idea of the possibility or meaningfulness of any type of regional political geography, whether Anglo-American, European, Nordic or something else. According to Stokke and Sæther, recent scholarship in the political geography of the Nordic countries has been characterized by internationalization rather than theoretical and methodological regionalization. Following this line of thought, Richard Ek and Anders Lund Hansen point out that, rather than participate in the academic region-building and border construction that inevitably involves processes of knowledge inclusion and exclusion, critical scholars should be equipped to study regionalization processes themselves.

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The Nordic model and the question of Nordic political geography

Kristian Stokke and Elin Sæther

Is there a distinct Nordic political geography and what would be its common denominator across national specificities and in contrast to non-Nordic contexts? In this short intervention we will focus on the role of one possible common ground, namely the so-called 'Nordic model' of statehood. Has the existence of a shared, but diversified, Nordic model of social democracy, welfare state, mixed economies, small-state geopolitics and regional identity given rise to region-specific Nordic political geographies? The argument we will develop is that it is difficult to identify separate theoretical and methodological approaches, but there are research themes and perspectives that to some extent are context-specific and related to the Nordic model. To support this argument we will provide some introductory remarks about the politics of political geography, outline basic commonalities and differences within the Nordic model, and discuss the contents and prospects for distinct Nordic political geographic practices.

Political geography is the study of power, politics and spatiality, while at the same time being unavoidably embedded in the spatiality of power and politics. In agreement with this observation, [Herb \(2008\)](#) argues that the history of political geography can be understood through its politics as much as the genealogy of its core concepts. More specifically, he argues that the state remains a locus of engagement and identifies three ways of engaging with the state within political geography: (i) to facilitate the process of maximizing the territorial power of the state; (ii) to assist in maintaining and managing the power of the state, and; (iii) to resist and question the spatial practices of the state. Seen through this ordering framework, the history of political geography is one of competing and changing modes of political engagement: (i) political advocacy in support of nationalist territorial expansion, especially in the context of imperial rivalry from the late 19th century; (ii) a perceived neutral and scientific support for state building and governance, especially in the positivist period of human geography from the 1950s, and; (iii) critique of constellations and practices of power, especially from the 1970s onwards.

Does this categorization of the politics of political geography capture the history of political geography in the Nordic countries? The ideological tradition in geopolitics had a strong presence in the work of Rudolph Kjellén in Sweden and Gudmund Hatt in Denmark, and can also be found in the role of the Norwegian and Danish geographical societies in regard to territorial claims in the Arctic and Antarctic ([Holdar, 1992](#); [Larsen, 2011](#)). In contrast, there was a striking absence of political geography within Nordic universities during the heyday of positivist engagement with the state, due to the disrepute of the ideological tradition and the lack of rigorous scientific methods within political geography. Thus, the links between political geography and the state were weak or absent during the period that was marked by the construction of the Nordic model and scholarly engagement in state governance. This contrasts sharply with Nordic human geography and social science in general, which have been marked by a strong tradition of scholarship in support of state building. While political geography has re-emerged in the Nordic countries since the 1980s, particularly in the form of Finnish critical geopolitics, it can be argued that this is more related to the international revitalisation of critical political geography than to contextual political dynamics in the Nordic region. Against this general background of changing and increasingly critical engagement with the state, what is the meaning and relevance of the Nordic model for the development of Nordic political geography?

The notion of a distinct 'Nordic model' has had a remarkably stable presence in academic and political discourse. Presented in an ideal typical manner, the Nordic model is said to contain a handful of key characteristics that are common across its contextual manifestations ([Hilson, 2008](#)). First, it is often observed that the Nordic states are marked by 'consensual democracy' in the sense that the political system enjoys a high degree of legitimacy, the relations between state, market and civil society are highly organized, social divisions are relatively mild and political deliberations aim to neutralize conflict and achieve compromise. The prominent position of social democratic parties, high levels of political participation and a tendency to favour neo-corporatist methods of decision-making are central features of Nordic consensual democracies ([Berman, 2006](#)). Second, the Nordic countries have been marked by a successful combination of state regulation and market capitalism that has yielded rapid economic growth and secured great affluence since World War II. Following from these transformations, the Nordic countries have come to be known for exceptionally high standards of living. Third, the welfare state is also a defining feature of the Nordic model, with comprehensive and universal welfare programmes as an integral part of state management of the capitalist economy and as means for promoting both social equality and economic efficiency ([Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)).

Fourth, the Nordic region as a geopolitical entity is also seen as an integral dimension of the model, despite different international interests and strategies. Being small powers located in a precarious position between East and West during the Cold War, the Nordic states are commonly assumed to share an interest in maintaining peace, sometimes resulting in a role as mediators between larger powers (see [Henrik Gutzon Larsen's contribution](#)). The small-state identity poses security challenges, but is also construed as a resource for international influence as it is associated with a moral authority that grants power through value diplomacy. Fifth, and finally, these defining features of the Nordic model are often said to rest on a shared regional identity. The group of Nordic states are assumed to share a regional identity in cultural terms and as a security community, despite obvious cultural diversity and the failure to institutionalize Nordic security cooperation (see [Moisiso's contribution](#)).

Beyond these idealized commonalities, the Nordic region obviously contains a diversity of contextual institutional arrangements and political dynamics. There are notable differences regarding economic models, the character of the welfare state, the constellations of political forces, models of democratic representation, and foreign policies and security arrangements. The latter was strikingly visible in the different strategies towards US- and Soviet-led alliance politics during the Cold War. The Nordic states also display very different foreign policies vis-à-vis post-Cold War European integration, especially between the old and new members of the European Union (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) and those who, for now at least, are non-members (Norway and Iceland). It can also be observed that although the Nordic states have arrived at a form of statehood with shared general characteristics, these are products of diverse political dynamics and trajectories. This means that while it is possible and common to talk of a Nordic model, it may be more accurate to describe it as "one model with five exceptions" ([Hilson, 2008](#): 113).

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that the Nordic model is not static but undergoing general and contextual processes of change due to both domestic and international dynamics. To take one example, economic globalisation has obviously changed the political space for states to pursue autonomous economic policies, thereby challenging and transforming growth and welfare policies within the Nordic model. Likewise, international migration challenges the assumed ethnic, linguistic and cultural homogeneity that the Nordic model of social democracy and citizenship has been

based on. In these and other fields, it can be observed that the Nordic model is coming under pressures that transform the model and makes it less exceptional in an international context, while also transforming the diversity among the Nordic states. For example, the reality of multiculturalism has given rise to strict immigration regulation in all the Nordic countries, but also quite different politics of citizenship and integration, ranging from an emphasis on assimilation in Denmark to a greater acceptance of multiculturalism in Sweden. It can thus be concluded that there is a persistent sense of a shared Nordic model, but also contextual diversity and changes within this model. What does this mean for the existence and prospects for a distinct Nordic political geography?

Returning to the questions of whether there is, can be or should be distinct Nordic political geographic practices, we will make two main observations. On the one hand, we find it difficult to identify a specific Nordic tradition in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches. The contemporary development of political geography at Nordic universities has coincided with and been inspired by the international revitalisation of political geography, and has been marked by the importation of theories and methodologies rather than autonomous development of Nordic approaches. Nordic human geography, like English language international human geography in general, displays a critical focus on power and broadly defined politics through a shared international body of social and political theories. Internationalization rather than theoretical and methodological regionalization is, in our view, the foremost tendency in the contemporary development of political and human geography in the Nordic countries (see also the contribution by [Richard Ek & Anders Lund Hansen](#)).

On the other hand, contextual power constellations and political dynamics have undeniably brought up research themes and practices that may be seen as distinctly Nordic. However, research on Nordic social democracies, mixed economies, welfare states and identities has been more prominent in other sub-disciplines of Nordic human geography than in political geography. This can be explained by the weak position of political geography during the formative period of the Nordic model, but also by the technocratic mode of engagement that made knowledge from economic, social and urban geography instrumental to state planning for urban and regional development. It can thus be observed that there is a body of human geographic scholarship on the Nordic model, often done in the service of state building and public administration. Such state-supporting research activities display, however, a certain political deficit in the sense that policy making tends to be handled in a technocratic manner. The challenge is to make the politics of the Nordic model and its continuous transformations into objects of critical political geographic scholarship. There is an abundance of under-researched themes for political geography emanating from this, including the politics of regional identity, small-state geopolitics and political geographic practices, discussed in the contributions that follow below.

There are also examples of the Nordic context giving rise to specific traditions of political geographic scholarship. The foremost example of this is the recent development of critical geopolitics among Finnish political geographers. Another example is found in Norwegian political geography, where there is a strong focus on politics in the Global South. Both fields are interrelated with contextual political conditions and state policies. The focus on politics and development among Norwegian political geographers can, for example, be traced back to development studies linked to Norwegian international engagement in peace and development. It has, however, developed into critical political geographic scholarship on contextual politics in the Global South, thereby deviating from both development geography and the strong focus on northern geopolitics in Anglo-American political geography. These

brief examples demonstrate that the Nordic model and context may bring up distinct research themes to be addressed by Nordic political geographers, even though there is relatively little basis for claiming that there is a distinct Nordic political geography related to this model.

Where does this leave Nordic political geography in strategic terms? Our conclusion is that it is neither possible nor desirable to mark off and essentialize a separate Nordic political geography. However, there are important contextual dynamics in the Nordic countries that deserve critical attention by political geographers and that can enrich international debates and function as correctives to ethnocentric universalism. The challenge for Nordic political geographers is to negotiate a position between the assumed universalism of imported approaches and the assumed exceptionalism of the Nordic region.

Rethinking Nordic unity and the Nordic model

Sami Moisisio

This intervention inquires into the “Nordic context”, as succinctly discussed by Kristian Stokke and Elin Sæther. The authors suggest that the Nordic model is often understood as indicating the existence of a distinct geopolitical entity, a kind of Nordic region, which is characterized by “a shared identity” and “common interests”. It is this often conceived Nordic unity that I will discuss first in my intervention.

Stokke and Sæther single out three broad issues that are usually conflated with the term “Nordic model”: a specific type of consensual democracy, a combination of state socialism and market capitalism, and the universality of welfare programmes as an integral part of state management. They go on to remind us that even though there may be a fairly clear understanding, or even a “persistent sense of a shared Nordic model”, the Nordic context is also characterized by “contextual diversity”, which should be scrutinized from a critical perspective. In the latter part of this intervention I shall take up the issue of “varieties of Nordicity” by discussing the geopolitical specificity of the Nordic region and the contextuality of the development of the welfare state that resulted in the “Nordic model” in Finland.

The Nordic region (used here as a synonym for Norden) is a geopolitical concept with a meaning that is dependent on political processes, discourses and interpretations. Considered in terms of the conceived “Nordic unity”, the concept is first and foremost a child of the Cold War, the external image of a political space consisting of Sweden (as its core), Norway, Denmark and perhaps to a lesser extent Finland and Iceland. This external image was construed around the issues of neutrality, peace and a lower level of military tension than in Central Europe. In such a view “the Nordic identity” represented “a model of the enlightened, anti-militaristic society that was superior to the old Europe” ([Wæver, 1992: 77](#)).

From the 1960s onwards, the concept of the Nordic region came to be associated with a specific form of state capitalism, involving epithets such as “social democracy” and “the welfare state”, as discussed by Stokke and Sæther. The “Nordic model” signified a “third way” (not to be confused with the “third way” of Tony Blair and his New Labour movement) between communism and capitalism during the Cold War ([Wæver, 1992: 77](#); cf. [Patomäki, 2000](#)). One may in fact argue that it was particularly the work of [Gøsta Esping-Andersen \(1990: 27, 28\)](#) – published only two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union – that forcefully conceptualized the “social democratic welfare-state regime”, characterized by a “solidaristic, universalistic and de-commodifying welfare system”, as a distinct Nordic model. It is interesting, though, that Esping-Andersen attributed the specific welfare-state regime to the

“Scandinavian countries”, not to the Nordic region. Be that as it may, the image of Nordic unity as being based on the Nordic model as a specific “type” of statehood has been so powerful that economic historians continue to discuss whether the phenomenon called “Nordic capitalism” actually exists and often conclude that it is possible to distinguish the Nordic model of capitalism from other models (see [Fellman et al., 2008](#)).

The image of a united Nordic region was affirmed during the Cold War by establishing institutional structures such as the Nordic Council (an inter-parliamentary body founded in 1952) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (an inter-governmental body founded in 1971). Both of these organizations are devoted to building up Nordic cooperation on a cultural and linguistic basis, and they have contributed greatly to the creation of an image of a unified cultural and political region where the vitality of this cooperation and unity wells up from the deep structures of similar civil societies and forms of statehood. Simultaneously, however, these organizations epitomize the exclusionary nature of the concept of a Nordic region. For instance, the many attempts by Estonian governments in the late 1990s to represent Estonia as a Nordic country (see [Ilves, 1999](#)) were largely rejected by the Nordic governments and their institutions.

The differences in the constitutive elements of the Nordic region are less often mentioned, however. Attempts to create a Scandinavian defence union after the Second World War failed, and since then the Nordic states have adopted different security policy models. Where Finland and Sweden have remained outside all military alliances, Norway, Denmark and Iceland opted to join NATO. It is similarly significant that attempts to create closer Nordic economic cooperation (e.g. the Nordek initiative in the late 1960s) have failed. As far as European integration is concerned, the Nordic countries have rather dissimilar histories. Denmark (1973), Sweden (1995) and Finland (1995) have become members of the European Union, but have reached different decisions regarding monetary policies (only Finland has adopted the Euro), while Norway is not a member and Iceland applied for membership only in 2009.

Indeed, it seems fair to suggest that the difficulties in developing Nordic cooperation within the EU from 1995 onwards, e.g. in the name of the ‘Northern Dimension’, were not due to the rumoured bitter relations between some of the Nordic prime ministers, but rather to the distinct geopolitical cultures that exist within these states. In short, European integration is valued, debated and reasoned differently in the various Nordic countries, and the whole concept of Europe is arguably being actualized differently in their politics. A healthy sceptic would thus point out that the concept of the Nordic region denotes as much regional disintegration as integration and unity.

The paradox in the concepts of the Nordic region and the Nordic model is that they conceal the quite distinct national histories and political geographies of five states which have historically developed very differently. Class and regional cleavages have surfaced in dissimilar ways, their political decisions have been motivated by different perspectives on security issues, for instance, and the very notion of “national survival” has been defined separately for each country. I would like to suggest that it is partly because of these distinct geopolitical histories, processes, experiences and traditions (and the related geopolitical discourses and interpretations) that no such thing as a common Nordic way of thinking, tradition or research agenda in the field of political geography has ever evolved.

One may also draw attention to the use of the concept “Nordic” in domestic politics. In such a view, the common denominator throughout the Nordic region is that this concept has been exploited in domestic political processes for decades. It has been used in political arguments to legitimize certain actions and justify specific political orientations. Again, this common theme discloses

at the same time the fact that distinct political use has been made of the Nordic concept in these states, inescapably carrying place-specific political meanings in different geographical contexts. In Finland, for instance, the concept of the Nordic region gained relevance in the spheres of geopolitics and identity politics prior to the development of the Nordic model.

Even though it is almost axiomatic today to argue that Finland is a “purely” western country because its political history and tradition hark back to a common history with Sweden (see [Lipponen, 2008](#)), this “western identity” has not been so self-evident in the country’s history (see [Kangas, 2011](#); [Moisisio, 2008](#)). Historically speaking, the meaning of the concept of the Nordic region has nonetheless been bound up with identity politics, so that its usage embodies the various historical attempts by political actors to define the country’s geopolitical identity and location. This can be illustrated with three examples.

Firstly, even though there was political resistance to the developing of closer political ties with the Scandinavian countries in the 1930s, cultural ties were actively represented in Finnish politics in the 1930s and 1940s. The geopolitical relevance of the link with Scandinavia was strengthened during the Second World War. The basic character of these arguments was that they sought to distance Finland from the cultural sphere of the Soviet Union by emphasizing its common cultural roots with Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia. The attempts to move Finland closer to Scandinavia from the mid-1940s onwards are today interpreted as efforts on the part of the leading anti-communist forces in Finland to distinguish Finland culturally from the Soviet bloc of people’s democracies and associate it with a Nordic (or Scandinavian) reference group of states (for an analysis, see [Majander, 2004](#)).

Secondly, strategic concepts such as “Nordic stability” represented important ideas relevant to the location of Finland on the geopolitical map of Europe during the Cold War. The identity politics role of the Nordic region was arguably strengthened during the Cold War, given that it was associated with an important security policy discourse of the time, that of neutrality. This fostered links between the concept of the Nordic region and the country’s identity and security politics.

Thirdly, the identity political dimension of the Nordic region surfaced again in the early 1990s as part of Finland’s struggle for membership in the EU. Some of the most visible opponents of membership offered Nordic integration as an alternative to European integration, arguing that the Nordic group of states was a natural reference group for political cooperation, a geographical setting that would prevent the inescapable geographical marginalization of Finland as a part of the EU. They also used the concept of the Nordic model to demonstrate the dubious dominance of “southern influences” in the EU. Interestingly, the strongest proponents of membership argued that the Nordic cooperation that was being suggested was illusory and that the Nordic emphasis did not contain a sufficient identity political message for a state that sought to prove its true western political legacy ([Moisisio, 2006](#)). The heyday of the Nordic region and the associated cooperation in Finland was perhaps bound up with the times before EU membership, and the significance of the Nordic region for Finland’s identity policies has gradually declined from the mid-1990s onwards, indicating that the processes of state and national survival have been largely detached from it.

The development of the Nordic model in Finland is equally contextual and country-specific. Any critical scholar would thus point out that the development of what [Esping-Andersen \(1990\)](#) later famously conceptualized as the social democratic welfare-state regime differs in its political origins and geographies between the Nordic countries. Applying the perspective of [Painter and Jeffrey \(2009: 47\)](#), I would like to argue that the particular

Keynesian institutional innovations that emerged in Finland in the 1960s and culminated in the 1980s, such as the principles of regional and social equity, came first and the diagnosis that these political innovations add up to an integrated, functional whole called the Nordic welfare state followed only later. This is to say that the development of the “Nordic model” in Finland was not so much based on “Nordicity” (even though some of the policy models were copied from Sweden) but rather on a specific governmental rationality that sought to foster the legitimacy of the state apparatus. In other words, the political practices that constituted the welfare state were ultimately about constituting what Deborah Cowen and Neil Smith (2009) call “geopolitical social”. These practices were part and parcel to the making of a national social order and society. The making of this national society and its coupling with the national territory served certain specific political ends.

I would like to argue that the construction of the “geopolitical social” was in Finland based on a specific type of “cartel state” which can be considered an alternative to the aggressive ideology of competition. The development of this cartel state took place in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately based on the principle that domestic competition – be it between social classes, institutions, companies or places – was pernicious from the perspective of the national social order. Indeed, throughout what is today understood as the construction of the Nordic model of statehood, governments sought to chain free competition within the state by allowing cartels in key economic sectors, for instance. These cartels – which were finally banned in 1992 as the neoliberal politics of competition reached Finland – were of course developed in order to regulate overproduction and to harmonize prices for the needs of the export markets, but they should also be seen as reflecting the wider societal development within the state. As the historian Markku Kuisma (2010: 96, 117) succinctly argues, cartels in Finland were part of the creation of a domestic societal order which enabled the paper workers to “construct their detached houses”, the state to construct schools and hospitals and elites to “plan their next moves without being rushed”. The cartel state was thus a “national coalition” within which political projects and processes were first and foremost articulated in the name of a national consensus and sense of integrity. This was epitomized by the need of governments to influence the level of employment, for instance, and to regulate demand through interventionist and growth-oriented social policies from the late 1950s onwards. The underlying idea was that strengthening the country on a national scale would not only contribute to economic growth but also lead to political compromise (the “national consensus”) by overcoming class differences.

The policy innovations that are connected with the Nordic model in Finland today can thus be looked on as political strategies which sought to minimize the risk of widespread social unrest, which could potentially have led to the demise of the capitalist economic system. In this context, leftist political radicalism was regarded as the primary threat to state sovereignty and independence, so that the maintenance of Finnish independence required particular economic interventions that would increase the legitimacy of the state apparatus throughout the territory by producing economic growth and welfare. The struggle against the spread of communism in particular (both in urban areas and in the peripheries) and the construction of a spatially integrated state were thus inherently interlinked. In summary, most of the projects that territorialized state power in Finland from the early 1960s onwards and which were later associated with the “Nordic model” were motivated by a complex combination of security and economic concerns, and were inherently informed by a peculiar type of strategic thinking. This was first and foremost conditioned by the peculiar presence of the Soviet Union in Finnish politics.

As Stokke and Sæther remind us, the Nordic model, if there is one, is not a static phenomenon. The recent emergence and dominance of the discourse of a knowledge-based society and the language and practices related to neoliberal competition policies in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Finland calls for a Nordic-scale analysis, and an inquiry into the transformation of statehood (and into the entire political debate on the future of the welfare state) in a northern European context. This could not only add some important insights to the rich literature on political geographies of state transformation but also disclose key differences in how the “Nordic model” is being transformed in different countries.

Small-state geopolitics

Henrik Gutzon Larsen

Some five years ago, and for once the finer details do not have to be unpacked for an international audience, Denmark experienced geopolitics – with a vengeance. I am referring to the so-called ‘cartoon crisis’, of course, which has already made its way into several academic journals. Rather than yet another round in the ‘domestic’ politics of mounting ethnic nationalism and cultural racism (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2007), a venomous blend of small-state smugness and Islamophobia jumped scale, and seemingly out of the blue, the government was embroiled in a fully-fledged diplomatic crisis, while Danes more generally faced the unfamiliar spectacle of it being *their* flag that was burned in far-away places. From the habitual self-image of being a paragon of virtue in world politics, a small state but a moral great power, Danes too were now faced with the question: ‘Why do they hate us?’. This awakening to post-Cold War world politics, which in various ways is shared by all the Nordic countries, has manifested itself in a range of geopolitical practices, for instance the mapping of ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ on a worldwide scale (Fig. 1).

Set within the historical and intellectual context of classical geopolitics, the Nordic countries have had their share of geopolitical *enfants terribles*, be it Rudolf Kjellén in Sweden, Väinö Auer in Finland or Gudmund Hatt in Denmark. Yet, with the notable exception of Finnish geography, more recent Nordic geographers have recoiled from engaging with geopolitical practices in and of their own states. Here, like elsewhere, this absence is partly explained by the dubious local and international legacies of ‘geopolitics’. As more generally suggested in Kristian Stokke and Elin Sæther’s intervention, academic fashions and geographers’ role in Nordic (welfare) state projects have additionally played a part. I suspect, however, that this failure to engage with Nordic geopolitical practices also relates to a widespread if rarely explicated self-image of being ‘victims’ rather than ‘perpetrators’ of geopolitics. Yet geopolitical practices are not confined to powerful states. Indeed, as Marcus Power and David Campbell (2010: 243) observe, the critical scrutiny of geopolitical practices seems to diversify ‘away from the hegemon (the US) and the greater powers to examine other states’. To further this development, I will suggest that we should more explicitly recognize a distinct – but certainly not autonomous – small-state geopolitics, which I provisionally see as a situated perspective on both the small-state ‘self’ and on the wider world. What makes a ‘small-state’ should here be seen as the product of geopolitical practices, which in their own right are worthy of critical scrutiny.

Small-state geopolitics is and should not be a purely ‘Nordic’ concern. Indeed, as has been suggested in the pages of *Political Geography*, for instance, there has been a notable upsurge of papers on what could be termed small-state geopolitical practices. But also the Nordic countries provide intriguing sidelights on internationally better-known geopolitical concerns. A small-state geopolitical

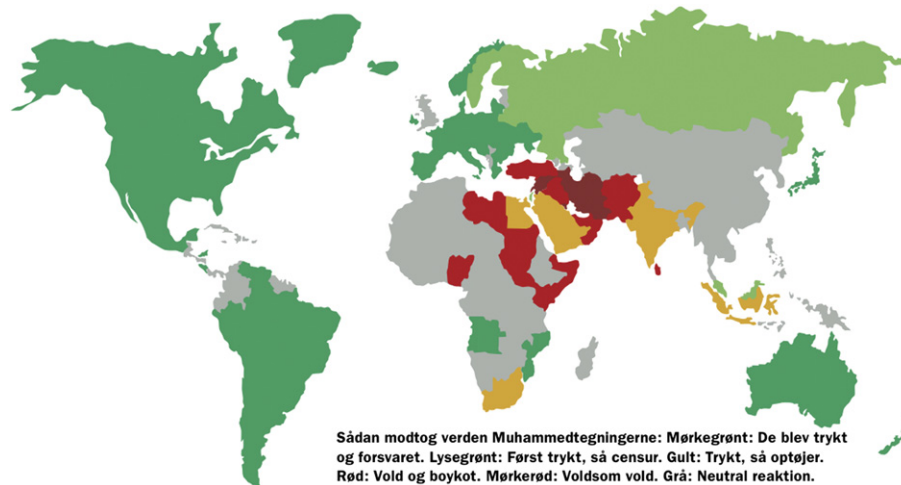


Fig. 1. A popular geopolitics of the 'cartoon crisis'. (Caption: 'Thus did the world receive the Mohamed-drawings: Dark green: they were published and defended. Faint green: first published, then censored. Yellow: published, then unrest. Red: violence and boycott. Dark red: severe violence. Grey: neutral reaction.') (Stjernfelt, 2010). For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.

leitmotif in point is here what could be termed 'the greatness in being small'. Focusing particularly on the pre-World War II period, Katarina Schough (2008) interestingly suggests that Swedish images of the world have been ordered around the essentially geographical figure of thought known as the *hyperboré* (the Hyperborean), a distinct variant of euro-centrism, which in various ways posits Sweden and the Nordic area (but not the Sami people!) as culturally superior and as a peaceful disseminator of culture. This makes for 'another form of expansionism... characterized by the imagination of Swedish supremacy and expansion *without* military support' (Schough, 2008: 17). That such 'peaceful' forms of expansion have relied on and aided the violence of greater powers is usually conveniently forgotten. Just before World War II, Gudmund Hatt somewhat similarly argued that the Danish state had long abandoned its great power pretensions. Yet the Danish people had shown its vitality by expanding its *Livsrum* (living space) through commercial (rather than territorial) geographical expansion. Moreover, as a small-state geo-politician, he was clearly uncomfortable with contemporaneous notions of geographical size as a measure of strength. Shortly before Nazi Germany's occupation of Denmark, he warned:

One should guard oneself against counting so strongly on quantity that one forgets quality. Small states can be strong, well organized, full of life and leading in cultural development. Large states can be unorganized, hopelessly full of contradictions, weak and disposed to falling apart. (Quoted in Larsen, 2011: 44)

Indeed, as Durkheim reflects more generally, 'societies can have their pride, not in being the greatest or the wealthiest, but in being the most just, the best organized and in possessing the best moral constitution' (quoted in Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 8).

Such visions of the Nordic countries as essentially peaceful and qualitatively 'superior' actors in world politics have been reworked and rearticulated in various ways. It is not by chance, I think, that Nordic geographers mostly investigate world politics through lenses of 'development'! Yet, as Schough (2008) argues, the figure of the ostensibly peaceful *hyperboré* has always had militarism as its dark, but usually bottled-up, Siamese twin. With the waning of Cold War politics, this figure is now raising its head in the Nordic countries, which, having for long walked a geopolitical tightrope between powerful neighbours as neutrals or as 'allied with reservations' (Villaume, 1995), for the first time in generations have

become warring states. The well-established Nordic foreign policy instruments of trade, aid and peacekeepers are giving way to more aggressive means, and this gives rise to new if still unsettled small-state geopolitical imaginaries. It is little wonder that many Danes experienced a burst of geopolitical vertigo at the eruption of the 'cartoon crisis'!

These are but a few of the small-state geopolitical representations and practices of the past and the present in which Nordic geographers ought to become more engaged. John Agnew (1994) famously warns against the 'territorial trap'. Discounting that Agnew uses 'territory' in a somewhat narrow sense, as a synonym for the state, this warning should also apply to analyses of small-state geopolitics, and like my fellow interventionists, I see Nordic political geography as part of a transnational, critical endeavour. Yet, through our command of 'obscure' languages and histories, Nordic geographers can – like other similarly situated geographers – also take advantage of the territories in which we are entrapped by birth, and we should not be afraid of mobilising our embeddedness analytically. Like Jouni Häkli (2003), I think that there is a 'market' – no, a need – for 'parochial' political geographies, be they 'Nordic' or otherwise.

Small states may be more than *Kleinstaatengerümpel*, 'a rubbish of small states' (Parker, 1985: 186), as Nazi jargon would have it. Yet small is not necessarily beautiful, and also small-state geopolitics must be subjected to critical scrutiny. The North and the Nordic countries are by no means the only context in which to pursue such an undertaking; but for 'parochial' Nordic as well as wider intellectual and practical reasons, we need more work of this sort from Nordic geographers.

Towards a topological view of Nordic political geography?

Richard Ek and Anders Lund Hansen

Is it meaningful to think about a "specific" or "unique" Nordic political geography? Yes, absolutely! If you are into disciplinary boundary setting and academic empire building it is. We do not think that this is a rewarding course, however. Sure, we could always come up with a working definition of Nordic political geography for the record, perhaps something like: 'The work and publications of scholars regarding themselves as political geographers who are currently living and working in a Nordic country'.

But we could just as well choose not to put any effort or energy into that, since such an act of framing always becomes problematic at the next step: How should we define “Nordic”, “political”, or even “geography”? Still, we find the issue interesting and even one in which some debate is necessary. We would therefore like to make some comments of a politico-epistemological and politico-ontological character concerning the idea and imagination of a “Nordic political geography”.

Politico-epistemologically, we argue that geography is an intertextual body of knowledge work. This is hardly a controversial stance in the light of the work conducted for decades now in the sociology of science and the history of geographical thought. This means that influences (from continental philosophy, just to mention one example) have travelled and been transformed in the networks of academic scholarship to such a degree that we could never draw any lines of an epistemological character that would not immediately show flaws. All kinds of distinctions and boundaries are after all arbitrary and open to re-negotiation (Ingold, 2007). James Sidaway (2007) makes a similar point in his review of *Geography in America at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (Gaile & Willmott, 2005), where he argues that due to the entanglement of American geography with geographers from elsewhere (not only Anglophone geographers), the idea of “American geography” is a problematic one.

The attempts to discuss “Nordic geography” are illustrative here. The contribution by Kirsten Simonsen (2009) to *The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* shows the difficulties that exist in the attempt to define “Nordic Geography” from a self/reflexive point of view (see also Simonsen & Öhman, 2003). Surely, knowledge production in geography departments and elsewhere is situational, so that place and political context matter, and it is necessary to approach these things. We thus agree with the point made by Kristian Stokke and Elin Sæther in their contribution that contextual dynamics in the Nordic countries deserves some attention from “political geographers”, and with Henrik Gutzon Larsen’s call for critical scrutiny of Nordic small-state geopolitics. But at the same time the designation “Nordic” should be used with caution. “Nordic” identities are parts of intentionally constructed discourses, and the word “Nordic” easily resonates with nationalistic and Romantic undercurrents, and so on. Furthermore, geographical labels such as “Nordic” eradicate heterogeneity and indicate a unity that seldom actually exists, as Sami Moisisio elaborates in more detail in his intervention.

But let us go back to Kirsten Simonsen’s attempt to handle the limits and traps of geographically pinned down knowledge production. The overview of Nordic Geography is presented as a ‘map of an intellectual landscape...a narrative constructed by a writer who is ambiguously positioned in the very field one is trying to describe’ (Simonsen, 2009: 464). The review is then unfolded in the form of certain dominant strands (Nordic economic geography with regard to regional development, social and cultural geography with regard to defraying the costs of the welfare state, and German-inspired research into the history and materiality of the rural landscape). When a territorial approach is applied, albeit reluctantly, “Nordic geography” becomes in practice synonymous with the most cited works and clusters of geographical research in five countries.

We should be aware that the label “Nordic political geography” might have some heuristic and pedagogical value. But this value should never overshadow the limitations that are exposed and the dangers that are potentially unfolded. As a label, “Nordic political geography” delimits and excludes one form of ongoing knowledge production. Labelling is in itself an ontological act of organization that arrests, stabilizes and inherently simplifies (Chia, 1998). After all, ‘Political geography is richest when reworked, resituated,

redeployed, and re-imagined’ (Sidaway, 2008: 51), so that neat classifications, whether based on spatial categories or not, are not advisable. Furthermore, since classification is also a tool for forgetting (Bowker & Star, 1999: 280, 281), we need to ask one question that is very difficult to answer: what happens to research that is not included as Nordic political geography? There is also the moral problem of categorizing people, an act of ordering and stratification that sometimes, probably more often than we would like to admit, is used as a means of humiliation (Czarniawska, 2008): ‘this is not geography’, ‘this is not political geography’! We have heard these comments many times, usually in statements from established geographers directed towards Ph.D. students and their dissertation projects.

Politico-ontologically, what we see here as the problem in the approach towards disciplines and sub-disciplines as epistemological practices that can be fitted into geographical categories is the omnipresence of a topographical ontology. This is the same ontology (or root metaphor, the mosaic, see Buttner, 1993) that underpins the territorial trap, a concept that amply catches the effects of a topographical ontology and an issue towards which political geographers, of course, should be extra sensitive (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995). It is imagined that human geography can be compartmentalized and juxtaposed to other academic disciplines in the social sciences. Political geography then becomes a part of human geography, and the question in this commentary section is whether political geography can be further divided into a sub-sub-discipline, “Nordic political geography”, an amalgamation of geographical and thematic epistemological distinctions and delimitations.

This ontological approach to the production of academic research, the topographical approach, is inherently political since it makes it possible to crystallize hierarchies and other sorts of stratification. Some sub-disciplines come to be regarded as more central than others, more established, more legitimate etc. while some research is presented and represented as more central within each sub-discipline. This ontological approach also points out the importance of “finding” the “borders” of the sub/disciplines and often of defending them, sometimes against the mavericks among scholars who are “trying to get in”: This is not geography! It’s philosophy! (We have heard that comment as well.). We could extrapolate the consequences of this reasoning, applying a topographic approach towards the word and the world. It has “cleared the way” for the relationships between geographical knowledge, power and hegemony that have existed throughout the entire history of the field of “geography”. We have seen it in the provision of (absolute) spatial knowledge during the European “age of discovery” in the 16th century, for instance (Livingstone, 1992), and in modern nation-building projects such as Franco’s Spain (Swyngedouw, 2007). We have seen it contribute to the sovereign violence that is the effect of geographies of exception (Minca, 2007), and to the contemporary “cultural turn” in late-modern warfare (Gregory, in press).

Although an orientation away from this topographical view of disciplines in which the borders and characteristics of the sub-areas of the academic landscape matter the most could be a good thing, a topological approach to “Nordic political geography” as the work and research of scholars in the Nordic countries and elsewhere could also be fruitful. As we have learnt from the relational space discussion, a topological ontology focuses on the properties of the research and is not concerned with the topographical distribution of research results or characteristics in a paradigmatic or discursive sense (crystallising a core of research within a discipline as well as a periphery of heretic scholarship). Any attempts to see a set of disciplines, a discipline or a sub-discipline as a map or chart (for instance “political geography” as a borderland between geography

and politics/political science) with borders that by their own force characterize the “nature” of specific research would be futile. Rather, by taking a topological take on the social sciences as an academic multidisciplinary practice that is folded and unfolded (like Michel Serres & Bruno Latour's (1995) example of the handkerchief) in a constant intellectual becoming, research topics and issues are co-constituted and “thrown together” in a multitude of ways. Disciplinary belonging becomes secondary; instead it is the character of the work (research design, style of writing, methods used, ontological and epistemological starting points and so on) – the main subjects investigated in a person's publication portfolio – that comes into focus. This implies that a Baltic sociologist's work on urban economic stratification could be closer (topologically, not topographically speaking) to that of a Nordic political geographer on the fate of public space in neoliberal times than the categories and topography of academic work will allow us to perceive. When all is said and done, to put energy into labels (whether geographical labels or others such as “postmodernism” or the like) is not very interesting or constructive.

Nevertheless, the intellectual process of relating to and musing on the im/possibilities and in/appropriateness of an imagined Nordic political geography can in itself be regarded as necessary and fruitful. After all, it can be seen as a continuous act of boundary definition that is a part of the subjectification of an academic and intellectual identity at the individual as well as the community level (Foucault, [1976] 1998). We agree with the concern expressed over the dominance of Anglophone geography (Paasi, 2005) and the contestation of the hegemonic Anglo-American “international” knowledge production (Simonsen, 2004), but we do question first whether it is particularly useful today to draw a hard line between the dominant Anglo-American human geography and its non-Anglo-American counterpart. Secondly, we question whether there is any point in “fighting fire with fire”, that is, in creating similar imagined communities of geographers to counterbalance the Anglo-American one. The problematic step is making the distinctions in the first place.

Finally, we agree that the objective should be to facilitate and foster a multiplicity of spaces of critical Nordic (political) geographies – as has been the idea behind the International Critical Geographers Group (ICGG). A continued multiscalar – “international” – dialogue between politically interested scholars in human geography is without question an endeavour that we encourage. An intensified interlocution between “political geographers” in the Nordic countries on the dangers and im/possibilities involved in the emergence of a unified Nordic political geography should be part of that ongoing dialogue.

End comment: Nordic identity and political geography

Elin Sæther and Kristian Stokke

This series of interventions has revolved around the question of Nordic identity as a basis for a distinct Nordic political geography. Focusing on forms of statehood, regional belonging and small-state geopolitics, all four contributions share a critical stance on the question of a common Nordic identity: We recognize its absence, and in its place we find fluctuating boundaries, international influences and contextual differences between the five Nordic states. This position is articulated most strongly by Richard Ek and Anders Lund Hansen, who argue that there cannot be any topographic basis for a separate Nordic political geography. The same position is expressed in a more subtle way by Henrik Gutzon Larsen in his warning against a Nordic territorial trap. Sharing these critical concerns, Sami Moisiso observes that the Nordic region is a discursive construction that was born out of Cold War geopolitics and has

been used strategically by diverse actors to gain and maintain political legitimacy in national and international affairs. In our own intervention we similarly argue that the so-called Nordic model of statehood does not constitute a common ground for a regional identity and political geography. This means that all four interventions share the position that there is no ontologically stable basis for a separate Nordic political geography. Nordic identity, like all identities, is a discursively constructed imagined community rather than a fixed collectivity with a given essence and clear boundaries.

Still, as all the interventions also show, we find it interesting as political geographers to reflect on our regional identity and especially discuss its impacts on our research practices. Research is always and unavoidably situated with regard to multiple subject positions. Although the Nordic identity lacks in essence, our work as geographers still contain, as Haraway (1996: 123) says “views from somewhere”, also in a geographic sense. As unstable and heterogeneous as the Nordic identity seems to insiders like us, there is nevertheless a regional positionality that affects our political geographic research practices alongside other dimensions of situatedness.

Reflections on positionality in academia display a certain bifurcation between the view that awareness and openness about the researcher's positionality can reduce its negative impacts, and the view that situatedness can be a resource and strategy for knowledge production. The latter position can be illustrated with reference to our identity as political geographers: While we admit the futility of disciplinary boundary-keeping, as demonstrated by Richard Ek and Anders Lund Hansen in their intervention, we identify with the term political geography and use this label with a purpose, as a form of strategic essentialism. Likewise, we may seek to utilize our Nordic positionality in a strategic manner to bring forth contextual themes and perspectives that can enrich political geographic research and debates, and also challenge tendencies towards assumed universalism within the Anglo-American mainstream.

The four interventions point towards issues that become apparent when the Nordic regional positionality meets our identity as political geographers. Henrik Gutzon Larsen thus draws attention to small-state geopolitics and the tacit geopolitical assumptions guiding Nordic foreign policies, in order to make a plea for ‘parochial’ political geographies. Our own intervention observes that there are a number of political geographic research themes that emanate from the diversity and transformation of the so-called Nordic model of statehood and calls for critical political geographic research on contextual political dynamics. Along similar lines, Sami Moisiso highlights the diversity of political processes behind Nordic social democracies, welfare states and mixed economies. Richard Ek and Anders Lund Hansen argue that the use of the “Nordic” label is itself a purposeful discursive practice that has stabilizing, simplifying and depoliticising effects. These and other examples indicate that there is a basis for more active contributions from Nordic political geographers to knowledge production and debates in international political geography. All the contributors see this as a matter of critical engagement with contextual processes of power and politics. Hence, we do not see the construction and reification of Nordic identity as a necessary precondition or fruitful strategy for the further development of critical Nordic political geography. Rather we have sought to demonstrate that understanding the political dynamics associated with the label “Nordic” is the only precondition for the development of political geographies inspired by the Nordic context.

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